

OCCASIONAL PAPERS
ON THE HISTORY OF
BOSTON COLLEGE

BOSTON COLLEGE'S SECOND SPRING



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Father Thomas Gasson's determination in 1907 to acquire spacious property for a new campus and to engage nationally prominent architects to plan and begin the building of a series of collegiate structures must qualify as one of the most courageous and far-seeing decisions in the history of American higher education. The student body of the College at that time consisted of 150 young men from families of modest income in Boston and the outlying towns. The enrollment that year was actually one quarter smaller than it had been in 1900. There hardly seemed an immediate need for separate buildings for a library, science classrooms and laboratories, a chapel, or a college hall. Boston College's first A.B. degrees were awarded in 1877, so no alumnus was more than thirty years out of college; and since graduating classes had averaged about 18 over the thirty years, fewer than 600 alumni could be counted on to support the gigantic fund-raising effort that Father Gasson's plans obviously entailed. The magnitude of Gasson's gamble as he assumed the presidency of the tiny college on James Street in the South End can hardly be exaggerated.

There exist some contemporary accounts of Gasson's vision as it was first made public and gradually began to move toward reality. It may be helpful to reproduce them here as a recollection of and salute to Boston College's amazing "second spring".

Father Gasson became president in January 1907. In May the alumni held a reception for him at which he gave the first inkling of the magnitude of the developments he hoped to undertake. The event received

front page coverage in the *Boston Pilot*, and the following account appeared in the Jesuit magazine *Woodstock Letters*:¹

The College.—The Boston College alumni association gathered last evening at the hotel Brunswick to do honor to Rev. Thomas I. Gasson, S.J., who was recently elevated to the presidency of the College.

It was a notable gathering and the call of the secretary brought out men prominent in church, state and city life. Archbishop O'Connell graced the occasion with his presence, and many of the leading clergymen of the city, who were graduated from the college, took advantage of the opportunity to publicly express their appreciation of the honor bestowed upon Father Gasson.

Mr. Aylward '84 acted as toastmaster, and after a few brief remarks he introduced Fr. Gasson, who was tendered an ovation. The new president feelingly expressed his gratitude for the kindness evidenced by the alumni since his elevation to the presidency, and then the hearts of his audience were gladdened when he announced that he intended to make several changes in the college to meet the growing demands of the student body.

"In the first place," said Fr. Gasson, "it is my intention in the very near future to have the college and the high school separated, and the college will be moved into another building entirely apart from the preparatory school.

"I intend also to make an effort to get a new location for the college, where we will not be confined to one building, but we will get a big group of buildings and grounds sufficient for the uses of a big institution of learning.

"It is my desire to secure a staff of distinguished laymen to join our faculty and have charge of the several scientific and modern language studies.

"I must also have an advisory board consisting of members of the alumni association, who will make it a point to keep me in touch with their ideas of progress, and by this cooperation I hope to advance the college to the highest point possible in the intellectual world.

"I need money to accomplish these results, and I want the alumni to raise a fund sufficient to cover

the expenditure of moving, the securing of a new location and the erection of new buildings. In my plans for the future, the college will not be associated with the high school in any way, and the buildings will probably be located in different parts of the city.”

Fr. Gasson, in concluding, stated that he had other plans for the future also, but could not make them public just at present.

It is significant that the *Woodstock Letters* article reports that Father Gasson asked for a “sufficient fund” for his purposes, whereas the largest-type headline on the front page of the *Pilot*² announced that Father Gasson set \$10 million as his goal. In 1991 dollars Gasson’s proposal rivaled the major fund drives undertaken in recent years by some of the largest and most influential universities in the country. Of course Boston College never came close to Gasson’s financial goal during his presidency, but his fund target presented a new scale of aspiration for the Catholics of Boston that befitted the noble architectural plans that were developed shortly by Charles D. Maginnis and Timothy Walsh. The Boston College contributor to *Woodstock Letters* may have omitted the reference to \$10 million because negotiation with the superiors in Rome would be required before an undertaking of such proportions could be set in motion.

Father Gasson was letting the world know that he was thinking big. He wanted a “big group of buildings” for a “big institution of learning.” But he wasn’t thinking only of a physical plant. It is noteworthy that he specified the need for distinguished lay professors; Jesuits would not have the numbers to staff the seat of learning he envisioned. And he saw the curriculum expanding from classical-philosophical studies to embrace more fully sciences and modern languages. Indeed Thomas I. Gasson was a man of vision.

The account of the alumni dinner mentions the presence of Archbishop William O’Connell of the class of 1881. When he heard Father Gasson’s challenging dream, O’Connell was coadjutor to Archbishop Williams of Boston. Three months later Williams died and O’Connell, as the new archbishop of Boston, was in a position to abet Gasson’s plans. He did so enthusiastically and encouraged Gasson as he eyed a Chestnut Hill site for a campus.³ Before the year was out, in December 1907,

the energetic new president of Boston College bought the magnificent property that is now the central campus.

The following article from *Woodstock Letters* is one of the first published descriptions of the new college site. It refers to an initial plan for seven buildings, although in reality the first architectural plans included more than seven. The article echoes Father Gasson's alumni reception emphasis on the sciences:.⁴

Boston. New College Site.—The trustees of Boston College have finally brought to a successful issue a project that has for many months been under consideration.

For some time past the friends of the college have urged upon the authorities in charge the necessity of expansion, and the need of separating locally the high school from the college department.

This project had the hearty support of the alumni and old students of the college, and, above all, of the most reverend Archbishop, himself an alumnus, who is a recognized leader in every movement that tends towards the advancement of Catholic higher education.

The site selected for the new college is the Hinckley estate, a large tract of land—over 30 acres in extent—situated in Newton, bordering on the Chestnut Hill reservoir....The land faces directly on the boulevard on the north, adjoins the reservoir on the east, is bounded by South St. [College Road], Newton, on the west and Beacon St. on the south. Deeds conveying this tract to the trustees of Boston College will be placed on record in Cambridge to-day, December 12, 1907. The site is, and always will be, one of the finest in New England for academic purposes.

The surroundings are extremely artistic, for the land looks out upon the clear waters of the Reservoir lakes and the wooded slopes of the environment.

The upper part of the tract has a splendid elevation, while the land toward Beacon St. affords unrivalled facilities for a fine campus and for athletic purposes.

Upon this charming site it is hoped to erect a group of buildings which, both in design and equipment, will take a high rank among the college structures of the land.

The position and shape of the land must prove an inspiration to any architect who might wish to build a lasting monument of architectural excellence.

It has been suggested that the initial plan should contemplate a recitation building, an administration building, two science buildings with ample facilities for laboratory training, an up-to-date gymnasium, a library and a college hall.

In the new plan, provision will be made for special study in technical and scientific research, for it is well known that many of the professors are ardently devoted to scientific and technical training. The scientific department will, consequently, be a marked feature in the new development.

The present facilities for reaching this favored spot are many indeed, but in addition to those now existing others are projected which, in connection with the Riverbank subway, will bring this entire region within easy reach of the railway terminals and of the great local centers of travel.

While the scheme as outlined above will call for the outlay of a large sum of money, it is felt that the wonderful progress of the Catholic Church in New England warrants belief that these plans can be brought to a successful issue in a few years by the cooperation of those who have at heart the intellectual needs of Catholic youth.

Already steps are on foot to secure the funds necessary for the erection of the first buildings. A number of the older alumni and former students have entered into the work with enthusiasm, and it is hoped that their efforts, together with the assistance of all who are interested in higher education, will result in an early fruition of the hope of the president of the college, Rev. Thomas I. Gasson, whose energetic work since he became the head of the institution augurs much for the success of the undertaking.

The present site on Harrison ave. and James st. will be kept for the academic department [high school], after the change to the new location has been made.

At a mass meeting of old students and friends of Catholic Education, held in Boston College hall, great enthusiasm was shown and \$50,000 were subscribed for the building of the new college.

The first building, known originally as the Recitation

Building, later as the Tower Building, and now as Gasson Hall, was under construction from 1909 to 1913. An account of the arrival of the senior class on the Chestnut Hill campus in the spring of 1913 appeared in *Woodstock Letters*. It includes the touching remarks of Father Gasson, for whom the event must have been one of great satisfaction, his dream become imposing reality. There is irony in the reporter's boast that Boston College would never spill over its original 35 acres.⁵

Boston. The New College.—It is a cause of great joy to all interested in the development of Boston College to be able to announce that an informal opening of the new building took place on Friday, March 28th. For the present, only the Seniors will hold their classes at University Heights, but in September all the college classes will have their lectures and recitations in the new building.

The exercises at the informal opening were very simple. The Senior Class met the President at the South Street [College Road] entrance. Marching up the roadway, they entered through the west porch and proceeded to the rotunda. Here they halted, and Father Rector [Father Gasson] impressively said, "Members of the Class of 1913, we now, in an *informal* manner, take possession of this noble building which has been erected for the greater glory of God, for the spread of Catholic faith, for the cultivation of true knowledge, for the development of genuine science, and for the constant study of those ideals which make for the loftiest civic probity and for the most exalted personal integrity. May this edifice ever have upon it the special blessing of the Most High, may it ever be a source of strength to the Church and her rulers, a source of joy to the Catholics of Boston and its vicinity, a strong bulwark of strength for our Country and a stout defence for the illustrious State of which we are justly proud."

To friends of the college this event has a two-fold significance. It indicates not only that the institution is on the threshold of a new and greater era but that it has virtually completed fifty years of honorable existence.

The location of the new college is the very finest imaginable. It seems, in fact, to have been reserved

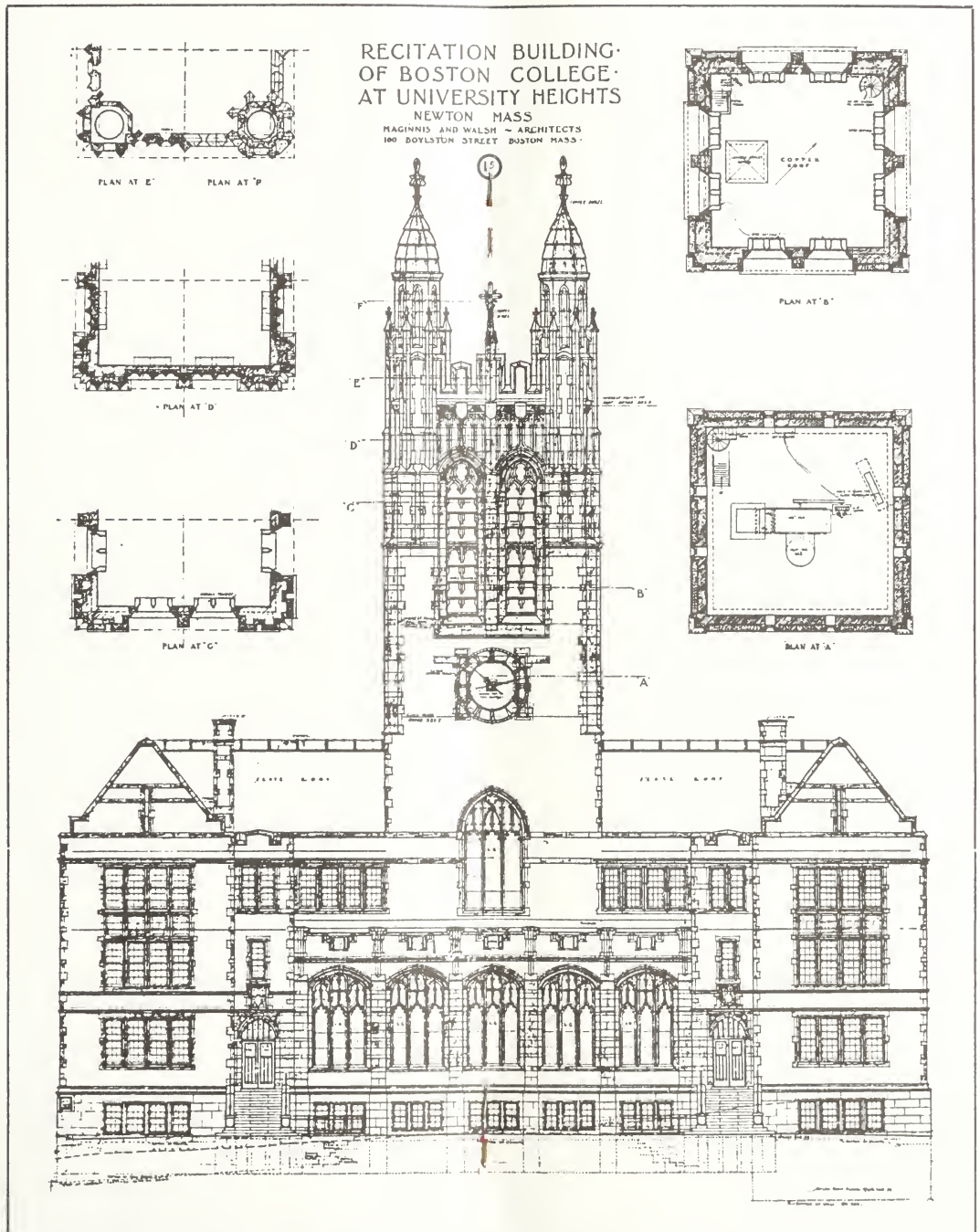
for academic purposes....Too many of our institutions of learning, collegiate as well as secondary, have followed the policy of purchasing land for the present rather than for the future with the result that they are to-day wondering where to turn for more room. Boston College will never find itself in that plight. It has grown rapidly in the past; it expects to grow still more rapidly in the years to come and it has governed itself accordingly.

The new building is one of the most beautiful in and around Boston and promises to be one of the show places of eastern Massachusetts. From its centre rises a majestic tower, which reaches a height of nearly two hundred feet. The structure is of the English collegiate Gothic style, and in architectural effect is very similar to the newer buildings at Princeton and the University of Chicago. It is, however, not intended that it should be left to stand alone. All arrangements and plans have been made with a group of buildings in view. Just as soon as the necessary funds are forthcoming the other structures will be erected. But the present building will ever be the dominant structure of the group.

Gasson's tower did not take long to catch the eye of the architectural community. During the first full year of occupancy of the Chestnut Hill campus the professional journal *The American Architect* published a 16-page article on the first of Maginnis and Walsh's Boston College buildings. It gave 7 external and interior photographs and 17 floor plans, details, or elevations. The brief accompanying text is presented here in its entirety. It will be noted that the architects intended the east entrance of Gasson as the main entrance. The article indicates the varied uses the space in the new building had to be devoted to—laboratories, locker rooms, library, classrooms, and offices—because for ten years it was to be the sole academic building on the campus. The reference to a dormitory shows that Gasson was just about a half century ahead of his time.⁶

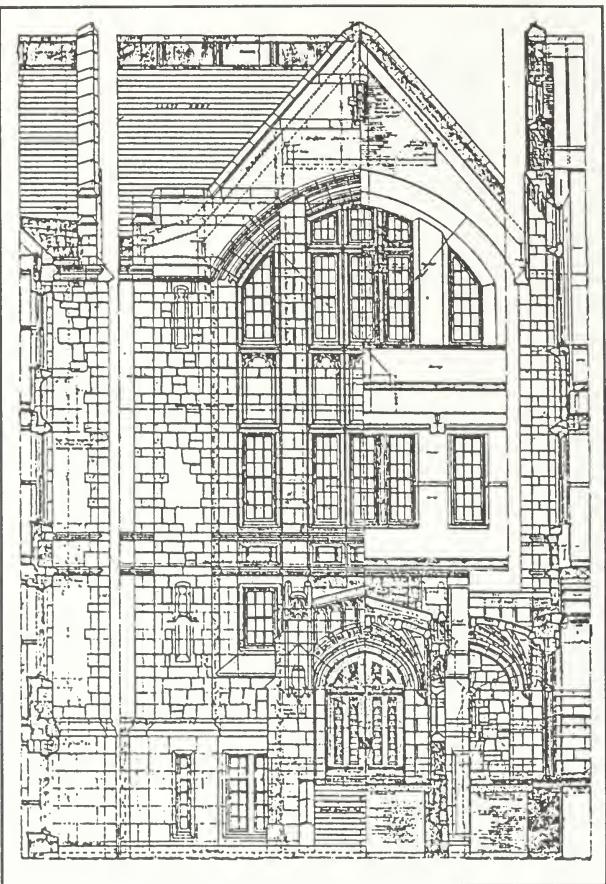
The American Architect, Vol. CV, Wednesday, January 14, 1914, Number 1986. The Recitation Building of Boston College, Newton, Mass. Maginnis and Walsh, Architects.

The new Boston College, of which only the Recita-



RECITATION BUILDING OF BOSTON COLLEGE, NEWTON, MASS.

MESSRS. MAGINNIS AND WALSH, ARCHITECTS



Detail of the central gable and porch on the east elevation of the Recitation Building. What architects Maginnis and Walsh planned as the main entrance to their first Chestnut Hill building now looks over the plaza that descends to O'Neill Library.

tion Building has as yet been erected, is to occupy a commanding situation on an eminence to the west of the Chestnut Hill Reservoir. The property consists of about thirty-five acres and is of varied topography. The landscape in the vicinity is in great part under the control of the Metropolitan Park Commission, so that no future development can do any prejudice to the beauty of the view. The higher ground of the site

consists of an irregular plateau and here are to be situated the chief buildings of the group. The style in which the group is conceived is English Collegiate Gothic.

The axial building of the scheme is the Recitation Building, here illustrated, the tower of which is intended to dominate the group. The main entrance of this building is from the campus on the east side. This is marked by a large porch. A salient feature of the main floor is the rotunda which comes within the lines of the massive tower and rises to a point under the roof. On the northerly side of the first story corridor is the large Assembly Room, accessible from the rotunda and by the two north doors; opposite this on the south side is the Library. The rest of this floor is devoted to the Reception Parlors, rooms of the President, Vice-president, Prefect of Discipline, Registrar and teachers. The second, third and fourth stories are occupied by classrooms, lecture-halls, laboratories and rooms for the College magazine. In the basement on the North is the great locker room, sixty-eight feet long by forty-two feet wide, and on the southerly side is the large recreation room. The eastern side is occupied by the chemical and physical laboratories and their apparatus rooms; the west side by the boiler, cloak and fan rooms.

The building is constructed of rubble stone obtained from the site, the trimmings being of artificial stone. Fire-proof materials are used up to the roof of the first floor only. The building is roofed with green terra cotta tile.

On either side of the broad avenue by which the building is approached from the North and South it is proposed to locate other buildings of the group. The chapel is to be between the Library Building and Faculty Hall which are to be opposite the Biological Laboratory and Assembly Hall. The South end of the avenue is to be dominated by the Dining Hall flanked by the Gymnasium and a Dormitory House.

A generous portion of the South Campus is devoted to athletic activities of students and faculty. In the south-western corner, the foot-ball field will be the scene of physical contests as gruelling as those which Puritan forefathers may have fought in the same spot nearly three hundred years ago. A base-ball diamond

adjoins the football field, and beyond it, to the east, several tennis courts are planned.

Messrs. Maginnis and Walsh were awarded the commission for the Recitation Building—the first unit of Boston College to be erected—as the result of a competition.

The most significant professional critique of the new Boston College buildings came from the nation's leading architect in the Gothic revival, Ralph Adams Cram. Architectural historian Douglas Shand Tucci devotes a chapter to Cram entitled "Ralph Adams Cram and Boston Gothic" in his volume *Built in Boston*. Cram's best known local work is All Saints Church in Ashmont, although he established his national reputation with the design for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Thus praise from Cram for Maginnis and Walsh's Boston College work was the highest possible accolade.

An article in *Woodstock Letters* reported the successful completion of a \$2,000,000 drive that the president of Boston College, Father William Devlin, had undertaken for the erection of the science building that now bears his name. The article then quotes architect Cram's comments on Boston College's Chestnut Hill buildings:⁷

Boston. The College—
The Great Drive for \$2,000,000.

The splendid response given to the Boston College Fund Campaign will more than ever draw the eyes of the entire country towards this institution, which is "a monument of esthetic value" not merely to Boston, but to the entire country, while from its halls "have come forth men who are an honor to the community, an asset to good citizenship." Such is the view rightly taken by the leading Boston journals. To impress upon our readers what has really taken place in Boston, and to indicate the cultural significance of the buildings being erected there by this Catholic college, the following opening paragraphs of a descriptive article by Ralph Adams Cram deserve to be quoted entire from the Boston *Evening Transcript*:

"For some years everyone who has seen the beginnings of the new Boston College—and who has

not?—has realized that something was happening here in Chestnut Hill that was immensely significant. The extraordinary beauty of the site and the striking qualities of the architecture make a combination that not only gives immediate satisfaction to the eye, but stimulates the imagination as to the future. Certainly, here is a scheme under way which promises to work out into one of the greatest artistic features of Massachusetts, even of the United States. Higher education demands, and has by no means received of late, the finest possible architectural embodiment, for the silent influence of good art is perhaps quite as potent along educational and cultural lines as is the scheme of studies and the discipline involved. When this higher education is knit up with religion, the demand becomes even more insistent, and when by chance this religion is the ancient Catholic Faith of the world, then indeed we have not only the greatest possible opportunity, but the most imperative demand for the best that men of today can provide.

“Every architect knows, and I should say every layman as well, that in this particular case the institution itself and the architects are meeting the evident necessity in the most appreciative, intelligent and brilliant fashion. The great tower has been a landmark and a joy to the eye ever since it was erected. The faculty building began to indicate future possibilities, and now the designs that have been made by Maginnis & Walsh for the chapel, the library, the science building and the gymnasium go still further in their stimulating promise. Usually one gets in American colleges one, or perhaps two, structures conceived in the right spirit, worked out in logical style and admirable design, mixed up with heterogeneous edifices of very varied value. Occasionally, as for example at Princeton, this number is increased to a preponderant majority. Seldom, however, does the opportunity offer itself for a complete and consistent group of all the educational buildings, planned by one hand and forming a consistent whole. Boston College is one of the exceptions, and from every possible point of view the general public must look with interest on the working out of the project, at the same time giving it every possible support, financial and otherwise. There are

no limits that can be set to the cultural and civilizing value of such a power as this.”

Cram was praising a scheme of building as much as he was lauding the first buildings of that scheme. Regrettably, soaring costs of construction made it impossible to pursue the original grand Gothic plan, and Boston College has followed the familiar pattern of “heterogeneous edifices” of varied style. Still, the five buildings that bear the Maginnis and Walsh stamp (Gasson, Bapst, St. Mary’s, Devlin, and Lyons) form a coherent cluster that gives character and proud identity to Boston College architecturally.

Thanks to Father William Stinson, who was librarian from 1923 to 1933, we have some thoughts from Charles Donagh Maginnis about his work for Boston College. Bapst Library was completed in 1928. In 1933 Father Stinson wrote a lengthy and detailed article on the new library for *Woodstock Letters*. He included in it some remarks of the architect on the occasion of the Library’s completion.

Maginnis was an incomparable English stylist, as can be seen even in this brief piece. Had he devoted his efforts to letters instead of architecture, he could have become one of the masters of our literature. Maginnis’ remarks are a fascinating disclosure of what led him to start with a tower, as well as of his sensitivity to the inspiration of the Gothic style. Here is the pertinent excerpt from Father Stinson’s article:⁸

On the occasion of the library’s dedication, June 13, 1928, the architect, Dr. Charles D. Maginnis, in the quaint and pleasantly dramatic part of presenting the keys of the building to the Rector of the College, told briefly and classically how it came to pass that the buildings of the new Boston College were reared in the spirit of Gothic beauty:

“As one thinks back to its rather adventurous inception, one is gratified by the security of Father Gasson’s title to the vision which first perceived such an eminence as this ground with buildings and people with a multitude of students. General testimony supports it, his successors unanimously proclaim it. Doubtless to him also is due the wisdom of the measure by which there was established at the very outset the large relation of building to building in

completed picture, giving thereby to Boston College, in this type of organized design, priority among the Catholic institutions of America.

“The acquisition of this superb property was surely a triumphant beginning and deserves to be a notable item of College history. The challenge to the architects which resided in its dramatic elevation, in the immensity of its vistas, in the natural and cultivated richness of its immediate frame, was clear and unmistakable. Here, in enduring stone, was to be raised an adequate and convincing symbol of the genius of a unique institution of learning. The College had resolved not to build selfishly. It had preempted a vivid space in the proud suburb of a great city. It must manifest itself, therefore, in such terms of beauty as to satisfy at once the impulse of its own high self-respect and a distinct communal obligation.

“What should those terms be? For the architectural style was yet to be determined. No mathematical street leads to University Heights such as would suggest the availability of those styles of architecture which, like the Classic and the Renaissance, depend for their impressiveness on literal balance and symmetry and axial vista. One approaches on curved and oblique lines with constantly shifting perspective. Only a great tower overtopping the trees could adequately focalize the group under those circumstances. This was the first conviction which emerged from the study of the architects. With this large peg to hang the fancy on, the choice of Gothic was almost inevitable. Time only emphasizes the fortuitousness of this choice. You are familiar with the high estate of this beautiful tradition. History has no record of a system of architecture which expresses so eloquently the genius of the Christian idea. To the felicity, the poignant beauty with which it testified to its religious inspiration in the ancient days, we have still living the majestic witnesses at Amiens, Chartres, Paris, Burgos, York, Gloucester, Canterbury,—a unique literature of stone which retains a marvellous potency over the modern imagination. Now and then down the years from 1600 shifting philosophies have sought to relegate it to the sphere of archaeology, but its ingratiations seem to be imperishable. I know of nothing in the history of modern architecture, for in-

stance, more curious than its present vitality. And I venture to say that this medieval art has never been, since 1600, so skillfully, so beautifully, so sympathetically exemplified as in this present hour in the churches, universities, and colleges of this country. Clearly the spirit of man is not to be satisfied with machinery. One is startled by the vividness of the reaction which has carried into our age in such flood this current of ancient Catholic sentiment. We see it even glorifying proud seats of learning behind whose walls is cultivated a haughty and fearful detachment from its implications.

“In the face of this development, whatever its significance, do we not perceive how becoming it is that this institution, born as it were to this great artistic heritage, should wear a Gothic countenance—a fair and proud countenance, which should grow with the years radiant and luminous as the soul behind it?”

It is fitting that we close this tribute to the spiritual and physical architects of University Heights with a quotation that includes a salute from the artist to the priest. Boston College cherishes its Gothic countenance and hopes that the soul behind it is as radiant and luminous as Charles Maginnis described it sixty-three years ago.

NOTES

1. *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. 36, 1907, pp. 133-134. *Woodstock Letters*, a journal published by and for American Jesuits, presented in each issue items of significance or interest about Jesuit institutions and activities.

2. *The Pilot*, June 1, 1907.

3. Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston* (Boston: The Pilot Publishing Company, 1945), Vol. III, p. 527.

4. *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. 37, 1908, pp. 121-124.

5. *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. 42, 1913, pp. 246-247.

6. *The American Architect*, Vol 105, 1914, pp. 13-14.

7. *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. 50, 1921, pp. 223-224.

8. *Woodstock Letters*, Vol. 62, 1933, pp. 211-213.

